



“Outcasts” Empowered, Upend Ideas on Female Identity at Wave Hill

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by Susan Hodara

Banishment. Erasure. Dismissal. These are the themes behind “Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness” at [Wave Hill](#), a 28-acre public garden and cultural center overlooking the Hudson River in the Bronx, N.Y. Yet the exhibition evokes anything but invisibility and victimization. The works on view portray women empowered.

The impetus for “Outcasts” was the American artist [Nancy Spero](#), who died in 2009 at age 83, and who was renowned for her groundbreaking visual expressions against abuse in all its guises, particularly relating to women. “Outcasts” presents three of Spero’s large-scale vertical prints: the ecstatic *La Folie III*, the more-than-eight-foot-tall *Cumulus*, with its lexicon of female figures, and *Masha Bruskina/Vulture Goddess*, a heart-wrenching depiction of the bound Bruskina before her execution by the Nazis, set between the outstretched wings of the ancient Egyptian vulture goddess of protection.



“La Folie III” by Nancy Spero,
2002. Printed collage on
paper, 72 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong,
New York, NY.

The rest of the work in the show is by a global mix of 12 younger artists. Each has a unique practice, but all embody Spero’s legacy by culling from history and mythology and reflecting her commitment to give voice to disenfranchised women around the world.

“Jettisoning the silence that has been imposed on women of all races and religions and classes and sexual orientations is important for all of these artists,” said [Deborah Frizzell](#), an independent curator who organized the exhibition with guest curator [Harry J. Weil](#), and Wave Hill’s senior curator Jennifer McGregor and curator of visual arts Gabriel de Guzman. “They give validation to women as protagonists,” Frizzell said.

The women in three photographs on view by the South African artist [Zanele Muholi](#) are fierce protagonists. They peer sternly, penetratingly, at the viewer, their hair styles as imposing as their

gazes. Muholi investigates the experiences of the African LGBT community in her work. The pictures in “Outcasts” are from her series “Somnyama Ngonyama,” meaning “Hail, the Dark Lioness,” in which she turned the camera on herself. In one, her Medusa-like dreadlocks are tied beneath her chin; in another they form a thick and cryptic circle above her head.



“Thulani I, Paris” by Zanele Muholi, 2014. Gelatin silver prints. Zanele Muholi; courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York, NY.

Nearby, [Kris Grey](#)’s work is also self-portraiture. Grey is the only participating artist who does not identify as female but instead as gender-queer. In two photographs and a video shot for the exhibition on Wave Hill’s grounds, Grey is simultaneously bride and groom in a solitary wedding procession. Head shaved and torso bare, carrying a bouquet of hair rather than flowers, the Brooklyn-based artist wears a lacy white undergarment with an ponderous train.



“Greenhouse from Procession series” by Kris Grey, 2017. Digital C-Print. Courtesy of the artist, in collaboration with Maya Ciarrocchi.

Grey’s pieces are the newest iteration of the performative series “Procession,” inspired by Jean Carroll, who was the Bearded Lady at Coney Island before undergoing electrolysis and extensive tattooing to become the Tattooed Lady. “She, too, made a transition,” Grey said, “a physical alteration to her body, a permanent change, by her own choosing. It’s parallel to my experience of my body, but separated by 40 years.”

The sources for [Jaishri Abichandani’s “Before Kali” sculptures](#) include Indus Valley terracotta figurines from 3500 BCE. There are 10 in “Outcasts,” fantastical female deities, naked and jeweled, in postures of transcendence, musing and pleasure. One has the head of a flower blossom; several sit with knees spread wide, as if fearlessly declaring their womanhood.

In her statement in the “Outcasts” catalogue, the Bombay-born Brooklynite wrote: “My sculptures physically reflect ideas of female agency... They refer to and subvert mythological patriarchal narratives.”



“Before Kali 40” by Jaishri Abichandani, 2013. Clay wire, wood, paint, varnish, 4 x 9 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Echoing Spero, subverted mythologies recur throughout “Outcasts.” They are there in [Scherezade Garcia](#)’s paintings of the West African sea goddess Yemaya, her dark face serene amid a swirl of golds, blues and grays. They are there in the sewn collages of [Marie Watt](#), a member of the Seneca Nation who incorporates reclaimed woolen blankets to recall tribal lore.

They are there in the Taiwan-born [Fay Ku](#)’s graceful mixed-media hybrids that interweave female, animal and botanical elements, and in the eerie “Night Spirits” photographic triptychs shot in the Queensland outback by [Tracey Moffatt](#), an Australian artist.



“Dogwood” by Fay Ku, 2015. Mixed media on layered and cut sheets of drafting film mounted on Plexiglas, 35 x 46 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Two pieces by the Malaysian artist [Yee I-Lann](#) re-envision the tale of Pontianak, a malicious Southeast Asian spirit. I-Lann’s single channel video, [Imagining Pontianak: I’ve Got Sunshine on a Cloudy Day](#), 2016, features a row of young women hidden behind swaths of their flowing black hair.

In the photograph *Landscape*, heads of thick, mussed hair blend together to form an abstracted geography of hills and valleys. These faceless women conflate the Pontianak legend with the region’s feminist movements, in particular the Indonesian Gerwani movement, which arose in the 1950s and 1960s before being squelched by the military.



“Landscape” by Yee I-Lann, 2016. Giclée Print on Hahnemühle photorag paper, 19 ½ x 66 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

The exhibition also contains site-specific works by [Samira Abbassy](#) and [Chitra Ganesh](#) and photography-based compositions by [Huma Bhabha](#) and [Mariam Ghani](#). These pieces address the exhibition’s theme with allusions to Persia, Islam and Judaism (Abbassy), Buddhism and Bollywood (Ganesh), Pakistan (Bhabha) and the American Southwest (Ghani).

“Outcasts” is a show that lingers, not only because of its layered perspectives infused with rich traditions, but also because of its present-day relevance. The curators began collaborating on the exhibition two years ago, within a vastly different political and cultural climate. Today, McGregor said, “the show feels more timely and important than ever.”

BASIC FACTS: “Outcasts: Women in the Wilderness” opened on April 8 and runs through July 9, 2017 in the Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill, 649 West 249th Street (at Independence Avenue) in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, N.Y. 10471. www.wavehill.org

On April 23, 2017, the concert “Women Composers in the Spotlight” will take place at 2 p.m. A conversation with the performers immediately follows.

On May 21, 2017, a two-part program “Outcasts: A Conversation & Performance” will take place. At 1 p.m., “Finding Her Voice” will feature a discussion with co-curators Deborah Frizzell and Harry J. Weil with artists Samira Abbassy, Scherezade Garcia and Fay Ku. From 2:30 to 4 p.m., “Using Her Voice,” a spoken word performance takes place on Wave Hill’s grounds. Free with admission.

For details, visit www.wavehill.org.

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